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## Read this Introduction

There is nothing stiff about memoir. It's not a chronological pronouncement of the facts of your life: born in Hoboken, New Jersey; schooled at Elm Creek Elementary; moved to Big Flat, New York, where you attended Holy Mother High School. Memoir doesn't cling to an orderly procession of time and dates, marching down the narrow aisle of your years on this earth. Rather it encompasses the moment you stopped, turned your car around, and went swimming in a deep pool by the side of the road. You threw off your gray suit, a swimming trunk in the backseat, a bridge you dived off. You knew you had an appointment in the next town, but the water was so clear. When would you be passing by this river again? The sky, the clouds, the reeds by the roadside mattered. You remembered bologna sandwiches made on white bread; you started to whistle old tunes. How did life get so confusing? Last week your seventeen-year-old told you he was gay and you suspect your wife is having an affair. You never liked selling industrial-sized belts to tractor companies anyway. Didn't you once dream of being a librarian or a dessert cook? Maybe it was a landscaper, a firefighter?

Memoir gives you the ability to plop down like the puddle that forms and spreads from the shattering of a glass of milk on the kitchen floor. You watch how the broken glass gleams from the electric light overhead. The form of memoir has leisure enough to examine all this.

Memoir is not a declaration of the American success story, one undeviating road, the conquering of one mountaintop after

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another. The puddle began in downfall. The milk didn't get to the mouth. Whatever your life, it is urging you to record it—to embrace the crumbs with the cake. It's why so many of us want to write memoir. We know the particulars, but what really went on? We want the emotional truths under the surface that drove our life.

In the past, memoir was the country of old people, a looking back, a reminiscence. But now people are disclosing their lives in their twenties, writing their first memoir in their thirties and their second in their forties. This revolution in personal narrative that has unrolled across the American landscape in the last two and a half decades is the expression of a uniquely American energy: a desire to understand in the heat of living, while life is fresh, and not wait till old age—it may be too late. We are hungry—and impatient now.

But what if you are already sixty, seventy years old, eighty, ninety? Let the thunder roll. You've got something to say. You are alive and you don't know for how long. (None of us really knows for how long.) No matter your age there is a sense of urgency, to make life immediate and relevant.

Think of the word: *memoir*. It comes from the French *mémoire*. It is the study of memory, structured on the meandering way we remember. Essentially it is an examination of the zigzag nature of how our mind works. The thought of Cheerios ricochets back to a broken fence in our backyard one Nebraska spring, then hops over to the first time we stood before a mountain and understood kindness. A smell, a taste—and a whole world flares up.

How close can we get? All those questions, sometimes murky and uncomfortable: who was that person that was your mother? Why did you play basketball when you longed to play football? Your head wanted to explode until you first snorted cocaine behind the chain-link fence near the gas station. Then things got quiet and peaceful, but what was that black dog still at your throat?

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We are a dynamic country, fast-paced, ever onward. Can we make sense of love and ambition, pain and longing? In the center of our speed, in the core of our forward movement, we are often confused and lonely. That's why we have turned so full-heartedly to the memoir form. We have an intuition that it can save us. Writing is the act of reaching across the abyss of isolation to share and reflect. It's not a diet to become skinny, but a relaxation into the fat of our lives. Often without realizing it, we are on a quest, a search for meaning. What does our time on this earth add up to?

The title *Old Friend from Far Away* comes from the *Analects* by Confucius. We reach back in time to another country. Isn't that what memory is?

To have an old friend visit  
from far away—  
what a delight!

So let's pick up the pen, and kick some ass. Write down who you were, who you are, and what you remember.

## Go

Writing is an athletic activity. It comes from the whole body, your knees and arms, kidneys, liver, fingers, teeth, lungs, spine—all organs and body parts leaning in with you, hovering in concentration over the page. And just like any other sport, it takes practice. Behind the football we see on TV, the players have put in hundreds of hours before the big game. The muscles of writing are not so visible, but they are just as powerful: determination, attention, curiosity, a passionate heart.

Begin to work those muscles. Just like you'd go to the gym every day, or at least three or four times a week, pick up the pen and do these ten-minute exercises. Choose a cheap notebook, in which you are not afraid to make mistakes. Use a fast pen. Try out different ones. Find what suits you. The mind is faster than the hand. Don't slow the hand down more with a ballpoint or a pencil. Cover both sides of the page.

But I like a pencil, you say.

Then use it.

What about a computer?

Use that if you like. Only know that handwriting and pressing the keys with your fingers are two different physical activities and a slightly different slant of mind comes out from each one. Not better or worse, just different.

But remember: there are no excuses not to write. You can't say, but I'm in the woods and don't have my computer with me. Learn to be comfortable with the most simple tools. What if you

can't afford to pay your electric bill? You should still be able to write.

Often people who use a computer at work prefer handwriting for memoir to create a boundary between their professional and personal writing. Many writers I know do handwritten first drafts. Then they take it to the keyboard.

We all initially learn to handwrite. Arm connected to shoulder, chest, heart. Come back to the beginning. But maybe that's not true any more. You might be part of the generation that used a computer as your first way to begin to write. If that's so, then use what you know naturally.

Begin with this topic: "I am looking at" and go for a full ten minutes. Whenever you get stuck, write "I am looking at" again and keep going.

Don't cross out.

Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar.

Be specific. Not car, but Cadillac. Not tree, but sycamore. But don't worry, if you write "bird" instead of woodpecker, you can figure out what kind it was two weeks later when you reread it.

The important thing is to keep your hand moving.

Say what you want to say, not what you think you should say. Trust what you put down, even if the editor or critic inside you says it's wrong or you made a mistake. You have time—give yourself at least two weeks before you evaluate. For now you are working out. Sweat. Keep moving.

Feel free to write the worst junk in America.

Every athlete is clumsy at the beginning. Don't worry. Keep going.

When you finish your ten minutes, wind down with your last sentence.

Draw a line under it. Skip a few spaces to begin another ten minutes. Writers are responsible to trees. You don't need to change to a fresh page. As a matter of fact, you also don't need

to stay within the margins. We are not in school. You can break the lined structure

Does your hand hurt—or cramp? Shake it out. This is not a race. You just want consistent movement. Don't clutch the pen. Hold it loosely. Keep your writing elbow leaning on the table. If you are writing in your lap, keep your lower arm in a straight line with hand and pen. Relax. Give your wrist support. Have it on the page.

Go for a second ten minutes. Try beginning this one with: "I'm thinking of." Every time you get stuck, come back to the topic "I'm thinking of" as a jump-off.

When you begin your timed writing, you enter your own mind. "I'm thinking of" is a way to begin, to help face the blank page. Once you start, you are on your own, but these two topics—*I'm thinking of*, *I'm looking at*—are basic, good beginnings. They seem similar, but each is a slightly different way to slice open your mind. When you begin with "I'm thinking of," you lodge yourself more up in the brain. "Looking at" directs you more visually and outwardly. Of course, once you get going they often cross paths. You can return to each one over and over in your exploration of memoir.

A dancer doesn't practice a kick one time in one day and consider that practice to be finished. Keep these topics in your back pocket and exercise them often.